

President's Special Review Board:
Unclassified Case Studies

Appendix E of the Report of the President's Special Review Board refers to 14 case studies that were prepared for the Board. Attached are two sets of memoranda and various background materials concerning the 12 unclassified case studies: (1) NSC-68; (2) U-2; (3) Bay of Pigs/Operation Mongoose; (4) Cuban Missile Crisis; (5) Covert Operations in Chile; (6) Cambodia Bombing; (7) Opening to China; (8) Mayaguez Incident; (9) Fall of the Shah; (10) Iran Hostage Negotiation; (11) Desert I Rescue; and (12) Marines in Beirut. The 4-5 page draft memoranda were prepared by scholars who were contacted by members of the Board's staff. The shorter 2-page memoranda on the same case studies were prepared by the Board staff as summary memoranda of the 4-5 page drafts.

These case studies should be viewed in the context in which they were requested by the President's Special Review Board and its staff. In order to examine more fully the working of the National Security Council system over time, the Board determined that it would be useful to examine the operation of the NSC system in a variety of real-world situations. The Board members identified a number of issues and incidents from the Truman Administration through the Reagan Administration that they believed might be instructive, and asked that case studies on those issues and incidents be drafted quickly to refresh their memories of the events, to serve as background material for their discussions with participants in these events, and to assist their deliberations. The Board's staff contacted several scholars about these issues and incidents and requested that they produce draft memoranda of 4-5 pages in length summarizing the relevant facts and highlighting certain areas of interest to the Board. The memoranda were supported by relevant extracts from books, articles, and other unclassified primary and secondary source material. As requested by the Board's staff, these memoranda were prepared by their respective authors as drafts under the severest of time constraints.

BAY OF PIGS, 1961, AND OPERATION MONGOOSE, 1961-2

Gregory F. Trevorton
Harvard University

These two Kennedy Administration cases offer the chance to look at decision-making on covert action at two points in an administration; in particular, arrangements for Mongoose reflected what the Administration thought it had learned from the Bay of Pigs.

Bay of Pigs

In April 1961, an invasion force of Cuban exiles, Brigade 2506, landed at the Bay of Pigs. The Brigade had been recruited by the CIA and trained by them at bases in Guatemala and Nicaragua. The idea of covert action to overthrow Castro ran back to January 1960, but this invasion plan, which had grown in size and changed in location several times, bore scant resemblance to that first initiative. In any event, the invasion was a disaster. The first landing party ran into a Cuban patrol, the beach was brightly illuminated, not dark, and, perhaps most devastating, the invasion did not spark an uprising inside Cuba: quite the contrary, as Kennedy later put it, "if anyone on the island knew of the invasion, they were working in Castro's office."

Kennedy had authorized one pre-invasion air strike by CIA-trained pilots but had deferred a planned second -- and larger -- strike until it plausibly could come from the invasion force itself once ashore. As the invasion foundered, he did authorize four unmarked U.S. jets to fly cover for yet another bombing mission (which was another disaster, the cover having arrived an hour too late). One hundred fourteen of the force died, and 1,189 were captured, later returned for \$53 million in food and drugs, raised privately at the behest of Robert Kennedy. The President eased out Allen Dulles as DCI and Richard Bissell as DDP (now DDO) but acknowledged publicly that the ultimate responsibility was his.

Operation Mongoose

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs disaster, the Administration sought to regroup. Over the summer of 1961, there was no strategy for covert action against Cuba and not much activity save a few harassment operations. In November, however, the President authorized a new program, called Mongoose, and intended, in the words of a Presidential memo, to "use our available assets...to help Cuba overthrow the Communist regime." Until August 1962, the focus of the operation was sending exiles into Cuba to collect intelligence, but the exile teams also conducted sabotage and paramilitary operations, including an

attempt to blow up a large Cuban copper mine.

By the autumn, Robert Kennedy, the driving force behind Mongoose, reflected his and his brother's disappointment with the slow progress of the program. In August, the Special Group (Augmented), or SGA, the inter-agency overseer of Mongoose, debated whether to step up sabotage operations, looking toward touching off a revolt against Castro, or ease up, hoping instead to sow dissension between Castro and old-line Communists on the island. In late August, the President opted for a stepped up program, but before its was implemented, the Cuban missile crisis intervened. In its wake, Mongoose was ended, though anti-Castro covert action continued under new control arrangements.

At the same time as Mongoose but, apparently, separate from it, the CIA was in contact with Mafia figures in an effort to assassinate Fidel Castro -- one of a series of assassination plans that ran back to 1960. In May 1962, for example, poison pills and guns were passed through a Mafia figure to a Cuban who was to undertake the attempt on Castro's life.

ISSUES

1. The Kennedy Administration came into office committed to dismantling, in Arthur Schlesinger's words, the "ponderous system of boards, staffs and interdepartmental committees" that its predecessor had used to manage national security policy. Accordingly, at the time of the Bay of Pigs, there was only a very small and informal National Security Council staff. McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor (then called Special Assistant) was involved in planning but not centrally. Much of the discussion of the invasion took place directly between the President and Dulles and Bissell.

Kennedy asked Gen. Maxwell Taylor to survey the wreckage of the Bay of Pigs; Taylor's report called for more systematic oversight of covert operations. It spawned several Special Groups, one of which, the SGA, was responsible for Mongoose. It included the undersecretaries of State and Defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Dulles, and Bundy, "augmented" by Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, and Taylor, then the President's military assistant. Kennedy was de facto chairman. Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara, the secretaries of State and Defense, were not members of the SGA but sometimes attended

2. In neither the Bay of Pigs or Mongoose is there evidence of deep divisions between Rusk and McNamara, or between them and the President. Rusk's undersecretary, Chester Bowles, strongly opposed the invasion, but Rusk generally displayed an acquiescent silence toward the operation. He did, at the eleventh hour, second Adlai Stevenson, the Ambassador to the UN, in pressing the President to defer the second air strike. McNamara supported

the invasion but does not seem to have been a central participant discussions, perhaps regarding it as a CIA operation, hence not his province.

3-4. In neither case was the NSC Advisor or his staff running the operation, nor even centrally involved in its initiation. The Bay of Pigs was very much a CIA operation, in motion by the time Kennedy acceded to the Presidency. Richard Goodwin, a Presidential assistant, was central in initiating Mongoose, along with Gen. Edward Lansdale; and of course the President's brother was a dominant figure in overseeing implementation.

5. At the time of both operations, administrations were not eager to tell Congress much about covert action, and Congress was not interested in hearing all that much. In the late 1950s, both Houses did designate subcommittees of their Armed Services and Appropriations committees to deal with intelligence matters. However, sensitive issues, like covert action, continued to be handled by a small "club" of senior members -- around Richard Russell in the Senate and Carl Vinson in the House -- meeting with Dulles. In this way, the "club" no doubt was informed of both operations, at some level and at various stages, though the record on the point is skimpy.

In late April 1961, Senator J. William Fulbright, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee read of the Bay of Pigs plan in newspaper leaks. He sent the President a long memorandum arguing against the plan and was invited to repeat his arguments to a planning meeting, with the President present, a few nights later. He did so, to no result.

6. The Kennedy Administration felt its own control of the Bay of Pigs invasion planning was deficient. Part of the problem was the transition, for the Eisenhower Administration had left a final decision for its successor, while Kennedy, though briefed about planning as President-elect, did not feel he could express a strong view until in office. As a result, the CIA was left more or less on its own, which meant that the implications of critical changes in planning were lost on the new team. For instance, the invasion was thought to be "fail-safe," for, if all else failed, the invasion force could simply melt into the mountains. Yet when Kennedy asked for a "quieter" invasion site, the CIA selected the Bay of Pigs -- eighty miles from the mountains across a swamp!

As a result, SGA control of Mongoose -- with the strange exception of the assassinations -- was extremely tight. It reviewed almost every detail, from targets to schedules to locations. According to the guidelines in effect, "any action...not specifically spelled out in the plan...will be brought to the Special Group for resolution -- guidelines that led the director of the CIA task force, William Harvey, to

complain to Dulles that the procedures were time-consuming and stultifying.

These tight procedures stand in contrast to the assassination plotting, and the latter remains a sad puzzle. Richard Helms, who had succeeded Bissell as DDP, later testified that he neither sought approval for nor informed anyone in the Kennedy Administration (including the DCI, John McCone) of the attempts; rather, he regarded the project, inherited from Bissell, as within the scope of the Administration's anti-Castro actions. Given then-prevailing notions of "plausible denial," he felt that to ask the President would be to "embarrass" him. Administration officials, including McCone, however, later testified that they believed assassination was ruled out without a special authorization and that, if requested, that authorization would not have been given.

7. The quality of advice was a crucial deficiency in Bay of Pigs decision-making, a deficiency that resulted from some combination of the lack of more formal NSC review processes, the transition and the newness of the Kennedy team. Kennedy asked for a JCS assessment of the plan. What he got was a lukewarm endorsement of the plan, muted because the Chiefs did not believe that they had been asked for a clear view and because the plan was that of a sister agency, the CIA. Kennedy, however, read the report as much more promising. Nor did senior Administration officials know that the CIA's analysts -- as opposed to the operators -- did not even know of the plan, so had no chance to bring to bear their assessments, which might have cast doubt on key premises of the plan (extensive anti-Castro sentiment on the island, for instance).

With no one (other than the President) driving the process on the President's behalf, Rusk remained inscrutable except for the air strike issue, and McNamara was not much of a factor. When junior White House staffers, like Arthur Schlesinger, tried to express doubts, they were interlopers on arcane terrain, hardly likely to dent a project sponsored by Dulles, a near legend.

The SGA (and its sister Special Groups) were expressly designed to remedy some of these deficiencies. The Group, meeting often, provided both reach into CIA planning and a reasonably broad basis of options for debate. For instance, in August 1962, the SGA initially decided against the stepped up program presented by Lansdale, opting instead for the less ambitious program, raised by McCone. It did so on the assessment that Castro would not be overthrown without direct American military intervention. Robert Kennedy's role also meant that someone was explicitly protecting the President's stakes in the process, making clear that decisions were responsive to his interests.

8. In the Bay of Pigs, the problem was not that the designated decision-making process was circumvented. It was, rather, that not much of a process existed.

9. The only instance of this use of private citizens in either case is the Mafia figures, in particular John Roselli, involved in trying to assassinate Castro. That certainly was unwise, but the more serious mistake was trying to kill him at all, through any means or group.

10. In both cases, the covert actions were consistent with overt American hostility to Castro Cuba. Of course, trying to assassinate Castro was very much at odds with both U.S. tradition and policy. As John Kennedy himself said in a speech in 1961: "We cannot, as a free nation, compete with our adversaries in tactics of terror, assassination, false promises, counterfeit mobs and crises."